

QUALITY ASSURANCE ISSUES IN WORK INTEGRATED LEARNING THROUGH OPEN AND DISTANCE EDUCATION IN NIGERIA

By

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Introduction

The trend at which distance education is moving these days has become increasingly noticeable in leaps and bounds. This is very much evident from the increasing enrolment in open and distance learning (ODL) institutions (Cavanaugh, 2005 and Fozdar & Kumar, 2006). Open and distance learning has a major impact on philosophy and practices of education regarding how students learn, how they can best be taught, and how educational resources could be more efficiently organised for the purpose of instructional delivery. ODL institutions are not only imparting knowledge as an educational mode which is an alternative to the conventional system, they are also striving in the areas of 'Work Integrated Learning' (WIL) which is made up of vocational and technical education, continuing education, teacher education and also high technology-based education (UNESCO, 2002; Mehrotra & Sacheti, 2005 and Bourne *et. al*, 2005).

Work integrated learning (WIL) is an arrangement between two resource groups, namely: an educational institution and an industry, in order to assist learners who are workers in the industry develop functional skills that are relevant in the world of work. It is a training curriculum which purposefully integrates training into productive and relevant work and therefore, remains a valuable link between training and productive work. The purpose of this training model is to give learners the opportunity of matching theoretical learning with practice. It is also aimed at ensuring that instructions carried out in the educational institutions are put to practice or have practical guidelines obtainable in the industry. Work integrated learning allows for professional work experience to be combined with classroom studies through many forms. This includes internships, cooperative education, clinical rotations, community service and studying abroad. Among the ideals of WIL is to promote and encourage learning in an integrated academic and work environment, though there are observable differences in how WIL's philosophy and curriculum design is interpreted and implemented compared with many other programmes. Distance education through Work Integrated Learning has much to offer the world of work because it is responsive, flexible, promotes independent learning, and will fosters teamwork as well as individual achievement and the immediate transfer of skills in the work setting. It also encourage income-generating livelihood for those who intend to diversify their means of livelihood through acquisition of new skills while in a particular trade. According to Mishra, (1994) and the World Bank,(2008) such acquired skills enhances productivity and sustains competitiveness in the global economy. Taking cue from this background, the National Open University of Nigeria offers through the Centre for Lifelong Learning & Workplace Training (CLL&WT) many programmes which are in the category of work integrated learning (vocational technical education) for improving skills and capacity building of adult learners. Programmes floated in this area, include mobile phone repairs, call centre skill among others. These are highly skilled

oriented programmes that involve intensive practical work that have a positive bearing on national development via employment generation.

In Nigeria, the term 'WIL' is not in trend but literally, it is synonymous with cooperative education which is a work integrated learning in which the time spent in the workplace forms an integrated part of the academic programme of study. As much as vocational technical education in distance learning is seen as a subset of work integrated learning, it falls into two general categories. One category is vocational training such as apprenticeships, where student works in their various trades, while undertaking formal training at a training institute typically a polytechnic, industry training organisation or private training enterprise. The other category is where a tertiary student, as part of his/her degree programme, goes out into the relevant workplace, typically over the holiday period and documents this experience. The student is assigned a grade for the work and/or report which forms an essential part of the degree programme.

This paper therefore reviewed the present status of work integrated learning and its quality assurance at the National Open University of Nigeria. It also examined the role of open and distance learning (ODL) system in providing effective and dynamic work integrated learning using the advent of National Open University of Nigeria's experience in the delivery of vocational training programmes in the area of mobile phones repairs and call centre skill development for the people working.

The Role of Open and Distance Learning in Work Integrated Learning

Open and Distance Learning plays a vital role in work integrated learning. It helps to assist in the delivery of education and training economically to a large number of people who are member of the workforce in the available industries. At the side of the learners, it offers them flexibility of time and place. Most adult learners and even those who are young but are working can only study on part-time basis. This, the open and distance learning has made possible. It has proved particularly useful for busy, mature and motivated adults and most importantly, has also allow them to choose how they wish to study and at the same time, fix learning into their lives activity. This assertion can also be deduced from Moran and Rumble (2004)'s observation. They remarked that the distance education is more cost-effective and can take place while continuing full-time employment. People who live in remote areas find that ODL permits them to enroll in programmes which otherwise would not be available to them or which would have been very costly to them if they will need to register for it considering the location of the institutions offering the course along with the financial implications of other related commitments that will go with it.

The ODL mode through its online learning opportunities, web-based training or e-learning approach has rapidly, expanded the workplace training ideas. It has in all ramifications allowed delivering of knowledge to individuals anywhere and anytime in the world. It has been recognized as the modality for vocational education and the different kinds of training offered through it has allowed vast number of people, hitherto unreached, to take advantage of education and training opportunities (Mishra, 2002). In the sane vein, right from its inception, the Centre for Lifelong Learning and Workplace Training (CLL&WT) of the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) was interested in reaching, not only new, older students, but also those without regular entry qualifications for the proficiency certificate courses. This from inception has been its focus in conjunction with the aim of specifically using computer-based skills to teach. This computer-based skills include internet-based systems in which multimedia (text, audio, video and computer-based materials in electronic format) are delivered to individuals through computers, along with access to databases and electronic libraries which enable teacher-student and student-student, one-on-one, one-to-many, and many-to-many instructions, synchronously or asynchronously, through e-mail, computer conferences and bulletin boards.

The role of open and distance learning in the field of work integrated learning is significant. Aside the exposure about it above, its two major functions centre around helping to respond effectively

to the growing demand of working adults or others who have difficulties in getting training in conventional education because of lack of flexibility in the timing and location of courses. The other one is to provide an opportunity for the empowerment of those who are disadvantaged by existing provision. These are the unemployed, the disabled and ethnic minorities who would benefit greatly for being trained in the area of vocational education. Open and distance learning in the field of work integrated learning makes up a mixed and complex picture. Many times, it involves experimental work and hands-on training as an integral element. It is therefore, often necessary to supplement distance learning with intensive experimental work and hands-on training residential schools, home experiment kits, etc. Examples could also be mentioned from within the public sector.

Quality Assurance Issues in Work Integrated Learning through ODL

Quality assurance refers to a process for the systematic monitoring and evaluation of the various aspects of a project, service, or facility to ensure that standards of quality are met. Open and distance learning (ODL) has evolved rapidly, resulting in concerns about the quality of its programmes'. As a result of consumers' increasing demands for high quality education, quality assurance has become a major concern of educational leaders, policy makers and teachers and has become a fundamental aspect of ODL planning and management (Belawati & Zuhairi, 2007).

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in higher education is a set of management and assessment procedures assigned to compare performance with objectives, and to ensure achievement of quality outputs and quality improvements (Harman, 2000).

The quality of any programme or phenomena is the distinguishing parameter that brings out or exposes the worth or goodness associated with the programme. In work integrated learning, vocational technical education (VTE), quality is the watchword of all its activities. This quality is not only in one aspect of WIL or VTE programme, but exists totally in all. This means that quality should be expressed as the functional character of the entire WIL document or curriculum with respect to the content, instructional methods, instructional facilities and resource personnel.

Work integrated learning has presently assumed amorphous dimension. As goals are now pasted with unpredictable and unidirectional blind alleys. There are remarkable evidence of poor organisation and implementation or functional policies, which has evidenced in the downward trends in the quality, both in process and products of work integrated learning, due mostly to the increased demand for access, reduction in public and private funding, diversification of institutions and courses, growing internationalisation and the persistence of the employment crises in many economic sectors and communities. These facts have contributed immensely in shaping the actual experiences of work integrated learning which are obviously difficult from students' expectations. The term 'strategy' is used to denote the particular combination of teaching, delivery, assessment and communication components used to

The issues of organisation and implementation are very persistence in expressing quality in work integrated learning programmes. Quality precipitates when organisational structure of a programme is properly defined. Realistic implementation of such programme reinforced its functionality and hence expose the worth or goodness in that programme. It is only when goodness embedded in that programme is exposed that community interest in the programme will be assured. The present problem of work integrated learning is focused on organisational and implementation incompetence and can be redeemed when an only when the organisational structure and implementation strategies of work integrated learning change for the better or become proficient.

The present work integrated learning programmes in Nigeria is greatly affected by wrong educational channels. The structure of work integrated learning in Nigeria lacks smooth provision for continuity. The beginning is as uncoordinated as the end. Students of work integrated learning receive their first orientation in the secondary school or technical colleges after their

primary education with the view that these students form their educational opinions before their exposure to work integrated learning form of education. Unfortunately, even at this late introduction state, the orientation is sluggish and atimes lacks quality as a result of the use of uncoordinated and unorganized human and material resources. It is for this reason that students run away from the basic technical education and training and rush into literacy education, only to crawl back into the same technical education at the National Certificate of Education level or National Diploma level. This advertently results in the production of inefficient, ineffective and unemployable graduates. This is the recent state of quality work integrated learning in Nigeria now.

Programme Delivery

Distance education encompasses many different ways of delivering education and training to students. The form 'strategy' is used to denote the particular combination of teaching, delivery, assessment and communication components used to produce an effective instruction support process. Distance education is a resource-based instructor methodology, its effectiveness depending heavily on the quality of the learning resources that are used and on the appropriateness of the delivery media. The specific choice of media elements for a distance education strategy has less to do with the technology and, media of which are available and had more to do with the nature of the learning which is involved.

The educational structure of the materials or the instructional process is the most critical issue. This is best worked out through the assistance of an instructional designer, who will help the teacher analyse the learning task and select a form of media appropriate to the programme's educational objectives. This ensures that the strategy used and the resources developed will enable students to gain the required skills, knowledge and experience efficiently and effectively. The process recommend here applies to the development of distance education strategy, be it print, audio, video, computer-based or online components. The best approach is to gather together the materials currently used to support the teaching of the programme and examine them and compare them with the curriculum learning objectives of the programme.

When this has been done, the resource gaps, that is, the places on the programme where essential information, instruction, illustration or explanations are missing should be evident. This will give the teacher clear picture of the kinds of resources required to make the distance education strategy work. At this point, decisions have to be made, about what media selection to make based on the combinations.

Like other programmes at the National Open University of Nigeria, the work integrated learning programme also follows a multimedia approach in instruction. It comprises self-learning material, supporting audio/video programmes, teleconferencing, counselling sessions, seminar based and the workshop based activities and added feature of personal contact programme to meet the specific learner needs. Participation of learners in the personal contact programme is compulsory. Teleconferencing is also used to provide greater clarity and understanding to the learners. A cooperative training model is an arrangement between two resource groups namely: an educational institution and an industry, to assist learners develop functional skills for the world of work. It is a training outfit which purposefully integrates training into productive and relevant work and therefore remains a valuable link between training and productive work.

The purpose of this training in WIL is to give learners the opportunity of matching theoretical learning with practice. It is also aimed at ensuring that institutions carried out trainings that are put to practice or have practical guidelines obtainable in the industry.

Within the training arrangement, the responsibilities of the educational institutions should include:

- (a) provision of the necessary manpower to effect the training;

- (b) allocation of the training timetable including the length of training;
- (c) selection of adequate and innovative learning content and learning activities for training;
- (d) evaluation of students to find out the extent to which they have acquired the skills they are supposed to acquire.

The industry, on the other hand, carries out the following responsibilities:

- (a) assesses the training resources of the institution;
- (b) examines the curriculum of the training programme;
- (c) provides funds for the execution of the organisation research;
- (d) provides occupational placement for graduates of the programme, where possible.

Summary

It is very clear that, for the growing economy like Nigeria, we need skilled and trained workforce. Labour markets are getting increasingly dynamic in the modern era. As such, training has become even more vital to cope with changes in demand. Employers need access to up-to-date and relevant labour market information as well as supply of trained staff if they are to meet the challenges of globalisation and competition. Quality assurance is an important issue in our sector and too complex a subject to be able to move than skin the surface on this paper. The attainment of quality learning outcomes at teaching institutions cannot be achieved without virile work integrated learning. Open and distance learning system is now well recognised for effective teaching and learning process. Cooperative education models could play important and viable roles in improving overall skills of workers both for industry and self sustenance.

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